

# Political Parties in the Trenches

Marc Hooghe  
Centre for Political Research, University of Leuven

*The local elections of 14 October 2012 did not lead to any great political swings. After almost a year of the Di Rupo government the positions of the parties remain unchanged and the latest polls do not suggest any major swings in the future. Despite the shaky start of the Di Rupo government, some sort of stability seems to have returned to Belgian politics. At the present moment, Belgian politics finds itself in a phase of trench warfare. Compared with 2010, all the parties have stuck to their positions.*

## TRENCH WARFARE

A huge amount of time and energy was spent on predicting the local elections of 14 October 2012. The archives of *De Standaard* show that as early as September 2011 articles were appearing about the election issues, the candidates and the potential political consequences. If the media in this country do anything well, it is the constant whipping up of election fever. Looking back on it now, we can see that much of the excitement was quite unnecessary. On the whole, as might be expected, the local elections followed national trends. The results of the municipal elections of October 2012 largely confirmed the federal elections of June 2010. The N-VA scores rather less than in 2010 while the CD&V traditionally does better in local elections. On the francophone side there is very little change at all.

27

It is a pattern that one often sees when comparing successive election results. Some elections do lead to spectacular shifts which pose a real challenge to the traditional balance of political power nationally. Yet in the following election there is a loss of momentum and the parties stabilise themselves at a new level. This is what happened here. The results of 2010 were indeed fairly spectacular with a historically unprecedented victory for the nationalist N-VA in Flanders. Between June 2010 and October 2012 Belgian politics underwent huge changes. One has only to think of the long drawn-out government formation which in December 2011 ultimately led to the Di Rupo six party coalition of Socialists, Christian Democrats and Liberals from the two language communities – but excluding the main victor on the Flemish side, the N-VA. This government has set about reforming pensions and reorganising the public finances although it should be noted that the stagnation of the Belgian economy has rendered it extremely difficult for the government to keep in line with the European budget rules. All these developments, however, do not seem to make the slightest impression on the voters who continued to cast their votes as they had in June 2010. Those who were then convinced that the N-VA would bring about change still believe it, while those who then believed that political parties would, at last, take responsibility for governing the country, also still do so.

At the present moment, Belgian politics finds itself in a phase of trench warfare. The coalition parties and the opposition have entrenched themselves into their respective positions and are unable to move forward. There are many parallels with 1914 when the German army overran the whole of Belgium like an express train between 4 August and 12 October. It is similar to the way in which the N-VA grew into the largest political party in Flanders. After 12 October 1914 the Germans were halted

at the gates of Ypres and in the ensuing four years they hardly gained a further metre of territory. Belgian politics too seems to have entered a comparable period of trench warfare and, unfortunately, the consequences could again be extremely damaging.

## FIGURES AND PERCEPTIONS

Although in the days following the local and provincial elections of 14 October 2012 many weighty explanations were given, no-one can seriously argue that they brought about any great changes. It has been argued by some that the political groundswell in Flanders is conservative and nationalist. But in reality, that is doubtful. Even in the city of Antwerp the progressive and left-wing parties together have won almost 46% of the votes and in Ghent the result is broadly similar. The most important difference between them was that in Antwerp the left's campaign was 'scattered', and they ended up as the 'big losers'. In Ghent, on the other hand, they worked as a cartel and their 45.5% was enough for a majority on the council. Yet it is now being suggested that Antwerp represents a wide right-wing conservative groundswell while apparently Ghent forms a progressive island. But one only has to look at the figures to see that there is little difference in the balance between left and right in the two cities. The real difference is that the progressive politicians in Ghent adopted a more sensible approach with a socialist/Green cartel, whereas in Antwerp the sp.a's alliance with the Christian democrats lost quite a few voters to other left-wing parties.

Antwerp attracted most attention both before and after the elections and rightly so since it is our largest city. But we should not forget that 96% of the Belgian population do not live in Antwerp. And there is also another reason not to take Antwerp as the great role-model for the rest of the country. The big problem with Antwerp is that, perhaps because of its size, it is extremely volatile in its political preferences. In 2000, the leader of the far-right Flemish Interest party, Filip Dewinter, was the most popular politician; in 2006 it was the Socialist Patrick Janssens and in 2012 it was the moderate nationalist Bart De Wever of the N-VA. That is not a clear line. The political preferences of the Antwerp electorate are so unpredictable that the most we can say is that in six years time someone else will be in favour.

## CD&V: THE FUTURE OF THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS

It seems rather less obvious, but the real historical significance of these elections rests rather in what happened in the smaller cities like Bruges and Kortrijk. At first sight they do not appear to be the most spectacular of towns, but they were the last genuine regional centres where the burgomaster was a Christian Democrat. Now even they have gone. In Bruges because the CD&V had no-one capable of filling the shoes of the outgoing burgomaster Patrick Moenaert and in Kortrijk through an effective coalition by the opposition. In short, this means that the Flemish Christian Democrats have entirely disappeared from the administration of the regional centres. For a party that until relatively recently could claim with justice to reflect the mainstream of Flemish society, that is serious. The Christian Democrats have to recognise that they have lost touch with modern urban culture. Of course, they are still strong in the dormitory towns and rural communities, but it would be hard to argue that that is where the real heart of Flanders lies. The chairman of CD&V, Wouter Beke, admitted during the campaign that his party no longer had a genuine 'narrative', which seems to be a way of avoiding the use of the word 'ideology'. The distribution of its results show that the party still has an ideology, but that it is facing resolutely to the past. The ideology of CD&V fits perfectly into the societal model of villages like Torhout, Tielt and Meeuwen-Grutrode. That is not, however, the model of the future that one encounters in the cities of Brussels, Antwerp or Ghent. Christian Democracy has played an extremely important part in the political history of Belgium and it would not be an exaggeration to say that its ideology has to a large extent shaped the Belgian model. It is, however, not so evident

that Christian Democracy can continue to survive as an ideology. In the Netherlands, the Christian Democratic CDA has all but disappeared. The Flemish Christian democrats, if they want to avoid becoming totally irrelevant, will have to come up with some answers to the problems of modern urban society. The burgomaster of, say, the small village Ledegem will probably always be a Christian Democrat, but that is not a basis for a long-term political future. The Christian Democrats are now trying to sharpen up their ideological profile, but it remains to be seen whether the operation will bear fruit. The documents published so far have not removed the initial impression of a rather old-fashioned, cautious middle-of-the-road approach.

## SP.A: STRONG MAYORS

On the whole, the opposite is true of the socialist sp.a. The party systematically focuses only on its urban strongholds. The number of rural constituencies where the Socialists campaigned independently has declined steadily. In the short term, that may seem to be a sensible decision: traditionally the Socialists do badly in the countryside, and one ends up investing a relatively large number of resources in local campaigns which lead to few seats and usually a place in the opposition. In the longer term, however, it is also an admission of weakness. Left-wing voters who live in the rural areas end up voting for other parties and are given the impression by the leaders of their own party that their votes are not important. It is certainly true that more voters are switching between parties, but the Sp.a is possibly the only party in Western Europe to encourage its voters to do so by offering no alternative during local elections. One can hardly expect loyalty to a party that cannot provide even the most basic organisation for its voters.

The strategy, moreover, has a further disadvantage: the sp.a is holding up relatively well in a few of the regional centres, but that has largely been due to the personality and input of local burgomasters. The party is clearly having problems in attracting efficient and motivated members, and it is not at all certain that the next generation will necessarily be able to take over from the present leadership. In Ghent, burgomaster Daniel Termont (60) will be retiring, and in Leuven, burgomaster Louis Tobback (75) cannot go on for ever. Has the party a new generation to hand ready to plunge into local politics with the same degree of energy and commitment?

29

The odd thing about the pattern for both the Socialists and Christian Democrats is what it says of the claim that in Flanders there is no longer a clear divide between town and country, that the countryside has been built over and everyone lives less than an hour from Brussels. The election results show that the boundaries between town and country are sharper than ever, and suggest that a process of self-selection is taking place. There is a particular group in society who have opted for an urban lifestyle and in general it is made up of people who can accept having neighbours with a different cultural background and do not mind not being able to park both family cars outside their front door. Those who think that it is important for their quality of life to have their own driveway, move out to the affluent suburbs. Despite the short distances involved, it creates a clear geographic dichotomy in our society.

## RESPONSIBILITY AND MEDIA FRENZY

As early as September 2011 the media had already started to go on about the 'impending' local elections and it was striking that on the eve of the elections of October 2012 it was already switching its attention to the elections of May 2014. This behaviour is totally irresponsible. By giving the impression that our politicians are continually rushing from one campaign to the next, it creates a climate in which there is no time left for real policy-making. Between now and May 2014 a number of important things have actually got to be done about social security, employment, taxation and the budget deficit. Are we going to waste all that time on petty electoral political games and squander

the future of our society? All in all, the local elections can hardly tell us anything meaningful about the elections of May 2014. After all, compared with 2010, all the parties have stuck to their positions. The Di Rupo coalition has clearly not yet won everyone over, but the coalition parties are not being punished for it. Everyone is remaining in their own trenches.

Although all kinds of exaggerated claims are now being made about ‘the mother of all elections’ in May 2014, the real test will come in the months following those elections. It is most unlikely that a single party or even an alliance of parties will win an absolute majority, so once again there will be lengthy coalition negotiations. Some parties will no doubt again be tempted to raise the question of constitutional reform. The difference from the previous long drawn-out crisis, however, is that we have signed a stringent stability treaty which has set clear targets for the 2015 and 2016 budgets. The Di Rupo government will not do the opposition the favour of drawing up a 2015 budget before the elections of May 2014, so it will be a new team that will have to complete that particular chore before the agreed deadline of October 2014. All the political parties are talking of safeguarding the wellbeing of the Belgian population. In the summer of 2014 they will have to face the ultimate test: either they will again plunge into a dead-end crisis with dire consequences for our economy, or a government will be formed relatively quickly which will carry out our obligations under the European Stability Mechanism. Until the summer of 2014, everyone can go on sitting in their own trenches; but after that the parties will have to face up to reality and their responsibilities.